
GANZ - ADVENT MEDITATION,
THIRD WEEK OF ADVENT 2024



The Dream of St. Joseph (1773-1774) by Anton Raphael Mengs (1728-1779)¹ in the
Kunsthistorisches Museum Wien, Vienna

Jim Harrison, poet, novelist (b. 1937): “Life is sentimental.² Why should I be cold and hard about it? That's the main content. The biggest thing in people's lives is their loves and dreams and visions, you know.”

I.

I would like to bring our attention toward St. Joseph, husband of Mary, and father-guardian³ of Jesus. In the painting (above), the artist opens for us a contemplation of the moment when an Angel (the same Archangel Gabriel?) made herself⁴ present to Joseph “in a dream”.

Matthew 1 (NJB): ²⁰ He had made up his mind to do this when suddenly the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, ‘Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because she has conceived what is in her by the Holy Spirit.’⁵

Many Christmas images are of Mary and the infant Jesus. When Joseph appears in a Christmas image, he is portrayed in a *supporting* role. Notice how often he is shown standing behind Mary and the Child. But in our painting, the artist brings Joseph to the front, whose presence fills nearly the entire painting, but who sits alone (something less

¹ Barbara Steindl on “**Mengs, Anton Rahael**” in *Grove Art (Oxford Online)*:
“German painter and writer, brother of Theresia Concordia Mengs. His early career was at the Dresden court; thereafter he worked principally in Rome and Madrid, notably on the frescoes at the Villa Albani and the Palacio Real respectively. As an early exponent of Neo-classicism, he produced some impressive classical and religious scenes, though he was most accomplished as a portrait painter.”

² The *Oxford English Dictionary* at “**sentimental**” - **1.a. – 1749** - Of persons, their dispositions and actions: Characterized by sentiment. Originally in favourable sense: Characterized by or exhibiting refined and elevated feeling.

³ I say “father-guardian” here to avoid “foster father”, which in light of God’s specific choice of Joseph to be Mary’s husband seems to leave out too much of the meaning of Joseph in relation to both Mary and Joseph.

⁴ The gender of Angels has never been doctrinally developed. Because Angels are not material but purely spiritual beings, our only opening, as far as I can see, toward some exploration as to whether Angels have gender can happen when we can decide whether the human soul (any soul) has gender. How deep does gender go?

⁵ [*The New Jerusalem Bible*](#) (New York; London; Toronto; Sydney; Auckland: Doubleday, 1990), Mt 1:20.

common in paintings of him). An Angel stands behind *him*, apparently, in a supporting role. But we'll get to that painting in a moment.

II.

Think with me of the times in your life when you knew that you had a gift (different than merely being clever, able to figure things out), and which gift you wanted to give (all of God's gifts in us are like this), knowing its importance – “I *must* share this”. But you realized that you were not *able* to give it.

But to leave the gift ungiven feels like death, the wrong kind of death, death to both the gift and to the one entrusted to give it. I think of Steve Prefontaine (1951-1975), that extraordinary runner, who said, “To give anything less than your best is to sacrifice the gift.”

Consider the circumstance when *having* that gift leaves out of reach *how to give it*. It is out of reach because, say, it is beyond your courage, or you can only see what structurally will kill it as soon as you give it (so why give it up to die?), or you already know that it will be resented by this or that person or clique, or because, as the biblical phrase has it, it can only be given “in the fullness of time” ... and it is not yet that time. Do you see? Having a gift does not mean that you automatically know how to give it.

Consider Mary, the mother of Jesus, who had felt for some years that she was the Keeper of a precious, a luminous gift. Others saw it; it shone in her. But she did not know what it was for, or how to give it, or when, and for what purpose.

Suddenly there comes an Angel (Luke 1:26-38), a gorgeous vividness of being, telling her, “I know what that gift in you is for, the gift in you which I recognized when I said to you a moment ago, ‘Hail, you who are *full of grace*.’ May I tell you how to give it?”

Yet, as soon as the Angel had explained how to give her gift – ³¹ Look! You are to conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you must name him Jesus.⁶ – there was again that frustrating HOW getting in the way: ³⁴ Mary said to the angel, ‘But *how* can this come about, since I have no knowledge of man?’ ⁷

III.

⁶ [*The New Jerusalem Bible*](#) (New York; London; Toronto; Sydney; Auckland: Doubleday, 1990), Lk 1:31.

⁷ [*The New Jerusalem Bible*](#) (New York; London; Toronto; Sydney; Auckland: Doubleday, 1990), Lk 1:34.

Well, the Angel had no knowledge of man but of a particular man. His name was Joseph, a carpenter by trade in Nazareth of the Galilee, whose lineage was in the line of David, the King.

I have found that it is a rare Christian who knows anything much about St. Joseph, who is devoted to him, and who recognizes that *how* he gave his gift was of central importance for the Incarnation – *how* the Trinity gave *its* Gift “for us and for our salvation.”

What wondrous love is this, O my soul, O my soul!

What wondrous love is this, O my soul!

What wondrous love is this, that caused the Lord of bliss ...⁸

Consider the significance in your life of a person who *is* aware of your gift, who recognizes its importance, and who *does* have the ability to help you give it. And then he or she helps you but without meddling, and who stays with you as you give it, and who makes your gift his or her commitment. We hear Jesus’ words in the Gospel of John’s version of the Lord’s Prayer (John 17): Father, ¹⁰ All I have is yours, and all you have is mine. ⁹

Here we get to the heart of the greatness of St. Joseph. He *was* that guy for Mary. He would be asked by an Angel (the same Angel?) to give up his life, and the plans that he had for it, *in order to let someone else have the grace, the really important grace*. Joseph chose to dedicate his life to letting Mary be “the mother of all the living” (the new Eve), making sure that the gift that Mary was, and for the sake of Whom she existed and for Whom she would sacrifice so much, could and would happen. Joseph made her Gift, not his gifts, the highest purpose of his life.

The greatness of St. Joseph was revealed in his choice – and the Angel gave him that choice, just as the Angel had given Mary a choice – *to let someone else have or be the gift*.¹⁰

⁸ Hymn: “What Wondrous Love is This?”, author unknown, first appearing in English, in the United States, around 1835.

⁹ [*The New Jerusalem Bible*](#) (New York; London; Toronto; Sydney; Auckland: Doubleday, 1990), Jn 17:10.

¹⁰ We might suggest that St. Joseph could be a heavenly patron of our nation, America, whose besetting sins, I believe, are especially envy and sloth. For his life and how he gave himself to let someone else be the Gift, is the utter repudiation of envy. The deep-set envy lying hidden in the American way is revealed in our lawlessness, resentment, covetousness, and our propensity to kill (cancel them, ignore them, demote them, wreck their reputations, or literally kill them) those troublesome others (persons, nations, ideas, etc.). The lethality of any Capital Sin lies in its ability to convince a person under its power that he or she, or they, is/are virtuous, are justified to act in these ways.

IV.

Let us contemplate our painting – *The Dream of St. Joseph* (based on Matthew 1:18-25).

First, the artist shows us a man of unmistakable self-possession, strength and virility.¹¹ Joseph had just listened to Mary share with him her surprise. How difficult *that* conversation must have been. His decision to “divorce her quietly” proves the degree to which he was upset. “Mary, you can’t possibly expect me to believe this, do you? Really? You’ve wrecked everything for us.” And now Joseph sits all alone – particularly poignant – but suddenly not alone. Joseph’s face is care-worn. He is being forced to consider now all that was in play with him and Mary, their future (which was wrecked), and their families already linked through the betrothal? I think that the Angel¹² became present to Joseph inside all that he was thinking, whispering to him – “You are missing something here, Joseph. I have a secret to share with you.” The Angel came to him, with the courtesy of Heaven, not into his room (as was the case when the Angel appeared to Mary) but became fully present to Joseph inside his thoughts and the tumult of his feelings.

Second, notice the wooden staff.¹³ This has long been an identifying mark in paintings of St. Joseph – a wooden staff, which according to a non-biblical tradition miraculously blossomed with lilies at the moment when God made known to the matchmaker that Joseph, not the other suitors, was to be the betrothed of Mary. It is a walking staff; one used to support a person walking far and used, if necessary, to fight off danger. It suggests a man who is in the process of going somewhere, but who has been temporarily kept from going there. Joseph also has a *how* that remains out of his reach. Notice how one end of the staff nearly touches the Angel. The staff makes a visual link between Joseph’s capacity to do what is being asked of him to do, and God’s commitment to help him do it.

¹¹ The *Oxford English Dictionary* at the adjective “**virile**” - **2.a. - 1512** - Full of masculine energy or strength; not weak or unmanly.

¹² The Angel of the Lord’ in the early texts (Gn 16:7c) means God himself. With the development of the doctrine of angels (see Tb 5:4b) their distinction from God becomes clearer; they retain their function as heavenly messengers and often appear as such in the narratives of the infancy. [Henry Wansbrough, ed., *The New Jerusalem Bible* (New York; London; Toronto; Sydney; Auckland: Doubleday, 1990), 1611.]

¹³ At the University of Dayton: “The lily is associated with St. Joseph, spouse of Mary, through an ancient legend that he was so chosen from among other men by the blossoming of his staff with lilies. Likewise, the biblical passage, “The just man shall blossom like the lily” is applied to St. Joseph in the liturgy of the Roman Catholic Church for his feast day, March 19th.”

Third, Joseph's relationship with Mary was shattered. Joseph had turned his back on Mary. He had already decided to divorce her. Notice how aware the Angel is of this and of the need for this relationship to be repaired. Notice the eloquence of the Angel's right arm and hand pointing back there, where Mary is. The Angel points as if to say, "Joseph, she needs you right now. What she has told you *is* the truth. Recognize how terrified she is about what could become of her, and her child. Joseph, God has chosen *you*, among all men, to stand with her in this. Remember the lilies? Turn around; go back to her; hold her tightly in those magnificent arms; share the depth of this holy Mystery into which you have fallen. You are both afraid. No need for you to be strong now; just be present. I promise that I will help you both through this."

And Joseph said, "Let it be done to her according to Your will. Give me only your love and your grace, and I am rich enough, and I ask for nothing more." And the Angel left him.

Happy third week of Advent everyone.